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ABSTRACT

This is a guide for teachers for coping with educational and behavior problems involving Indochinese students in American schools. Problems that might be expected and factors that contribute to problems are outlined, including: (1) language difficulty: (2) imitation behavior by Indochinese students: (3) effects of camp life: (4) intragroup animosity: (5) adjustment difficulty: and (6) cultural gap in the Indochinese family. In addition to supportive and preventive strategies for minimizing Indochinese student difficulties, suggestions for handling these problems are offered. (APM)

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Office For Equity Education's
Multicultural Education Resource Series

Some Considerations For Coping With School Problems Involving Indochinese Students

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SOME CONSIDERATION FOR COPING WITH SCHOOL PROBLEMS INVOLVING INDOCHINESE STUDENTS

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FOREWORD

This booklet is published and disseminated by the Office for Equity Education of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to assist school districts in ensuring equity education for all students.

This technical assistance document is designed to meet the multicultural needs of staff and students. By no means is it intended to be exhaustive or all-inclusive. Essentially, the information contained herein is to offer to staff a partial answer to the pressing issues with which they are faced.

The development and preparation of the contents of this booklet was made possible through thegenerous assistance of several staff members of Seattle School District's Bilingual Education Programs. These staff members are Shuh Yun Liu, Hiep Nguyen, Kim-Van Luu, Janet Lu, Huon K. Kong, Kim Sangto, Khamphao Sengsirirak, Gregory Chan, and Amphone K. Thepvongsa.

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SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR COPING WITH SCHOOL PROBLEMS INVOLVING INDOCHINESE STUDENTS

I. Introduction/Purpose

There are many school district and/or building staffs which have expressed concern regarding appropriate resolution of school problems involving Indochinese students. This concern is due in part to their lack of knowledge of the backgrounds of Indochinese students and how best should they approach resolution. Compounding this problem is the fact that many school districts do not have bilingual personnel to assist in the resolution process.

The occurrence of school problems involving Indochinese students becomes more likely as their numbers increase. Some school districts have already reported incidences involving Indochinese students. In certain cases an Indochinese student is solely involved. In other cases, a dispute among Indochinese students themselves or between Indochinese and non-Indochinese students may have occurred. Whatever the situation, successful management and/or resolution of the problem can be impeded by multicultural considerations of which staff should be aware.

When we speak of Indochinese students we are referring to students with Vietnamese, Cambodian, Loatian and Indochinese Chinese backgrounds. Additionally, many of the situations cited and the basis of this document are in reference to Indochinese students in the secondary schools.

It is important that Indochinese students be treated correctly and fairly in situations in which they may be involved. The causes of some of these problems may be rooted in cultural, experiential and language differences. The intent of this document is not to explore the nature and consequences of these differences. Rather, it is to equip school staff with some awareness of a number of situational factors contributing to the occasion of problems and suggestions as to how they may immediately respond.

II. Situations to Expect

Because of a variety of reasons school district staff may, on occasion (frequently, periodically, or rarely), encounter school problems involving Indochinese students. The types of problems will also vary. The range of problems may include:

- Verbal exchanges and fights between Indochinese and other students
- Harassment of Indochinese students by other students
- Verbal exchanges and fights between different groups of Indochinese students (e.g., Vietnamese students and Laotion students)

- Violation of school rules and regulations
- Skipping classes
- Taking personal items (stealing)
- Exhibiting certain behavior on an excessive rather than normal basis (e.g., overconcern with appearance, sexual activity).
- Isolated incidences of highly unusual behavior (student purchasing gun to rent out to other students)
- There are probably others.

III. Factors Contributing to Problems

In some instances problems involving Indochinese youth will result from the normal interaction that occurs between and among secondary school students. In others, there are contributing factors of which the school staff should be aware. A list of some of these factors with a short description is given below.

These are not given and discussed to excuse their behavior in problem/conflict situations but to give insight into some probable contributing factors so that appropriate response may be made.

Language Difficulty & Frustration

On occasion when English-speaking students tease or harass Indochinese students, they may use slang or words that the Indochinese students do not understand and may misinterpret. Because of the Indochinese student's inability to respond appropriately, frustration results. The frustration may progress to anger and a fight will then ensure. Therefore, what may have started as a not-so-serious verbal exchange rapidly turns into physical violence with harm being inflicted on one or more of the involved students.

Imitation

The Indochinese student in our schools are acting in a setting different from what they have experienced. They are already singled out as being different because of their physical appearances and language. They have a desire to fit in as quickly as possible. Imitation is one way that they use to accomplish this. An Indochinese student may observe what other students do and then imitate them. Because the Indochinese student is not thoroughly familiar with school rules and regulations and what behavior is acceptable or not acceptable, he/she may observe some student(s) doing something that's prohibited and then duplicate it later without realizing the potential consequences.

In this case, the Indochinese student's intent is not to do something that is wrong but to be and act like the other students.

Camp Life

Most, if not all, Indochinese youths and their families have lived in refugee camps before coming to America. Camp life was very difficult with survival being the paramount goal. Camp life resulted in many untypical behaviors being conducted by both adults and children. In some instances, their camp-survival requirements e.g., stealing, defending violently what is yours, "doing almost anything to make it," rapid adaptation to the immediate environment, etc., are transferred over to the school setting. Some instances of school behavior problems committed by Indochinese students can be attributed to habits acquired during their refugee camp experience.

Intragroup Animosity

Staff should be aware that there have been some historical and traditional conflict between Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Indochinese-Chinese peoples. This animosity has been aggravated by recent events in Southeast Asia. Some of this animosity may be expressed between Indochinese student groups in the schools in the form of verbal exchanges and/or fights.

Adjustment Difficulty

In the education system "back home," Indochinese students attended school with a rigid disciplinary system and with clearly prescribed student roles and behaviors. Teachers were to be respected and students were required to do what was expected. In America, the roles are less defined. In some instances, a rubber-band effect occurs in which some Indochinese youths, unaccustomed to coping with this new freedom and unaware of the limitations of student behavior here, may act outside of them not realizing the violations which they are committing.

Cultural Gap in the Indochinese Family

After a few years of being in the American school system a cultural and language gap oftentimes emerges between the Indochinese secondary school student and their parents. This, coupled with the need for both parents to work, results in a lessening of control of their children by the Indochinese parents. Indochinese student disruptive or mal-behavior at school may result from or reflect this particular problem at home.

Language Difficulty/Frustration with School

Due to the English-proficiency difficulties experienced by Indochinese students, some may experience frustration in school at an intense level. The problems of keeping up with the instructional pace, completing homework assignments, and doing well may discourage students to the point that they elect to start skipping and experiencing alienation from the school system. Or,

they act out their frustration on other students or over-reacting to disciplinary measures.

IV. Suggestions for Coping with Problems Involving Indochinese Students

1. Handle the situation as you would respond to any other school problem involving students. Overly special treatment of the Indochinese student(s) may cause them to withdraw or over-react defensively.

2. If it involves both Indochinese and non-Indochinese students, treat both fairly. Punishment for the involved students should be administered with this in mind and made clear to the Indochinese student(s).

   An example would be an Indochinese student talking with an English speaking student during an examination. If you elect to rectify the situation by moving the students away from each other, move both and not just the Indochinese student. He/she may interpret this as being singled out as the guilty party.

3. Due to the contributing factors discussed in the preceding section the first incidence of a school regulation violation committed by an Indochinese student might be responded to with a warning and explanation, especially if the student was unaware of what wrong was being done.

4. Contact the parent of the Indochinese student and give full details of what happened. The Indochinese parents are concerned about the education of their children and what their children are doing in school. In most instances, parents may take some disciplinary action at home if they assume that their child is guilty of causing the problem. It is important to discuss what happened in full, especially if fault does not wholly lay with the Indochinese student.

5. Use native speakers if possible. When a serious incident occurs that involves Indochinese students, the use of a native speaker will greatly facilitate the necessary communication to determine what exactly happened and to resolve the problem. If a school district or building does not have a native speaker of Vietnamese, Cambodia or Laotian staff should contact a local social service agency for Indochinese people or a local sponsoring group or agency.

   However, if a native speaker is used for resolving conflicts between different Indochinese groups (e.g., Laotians and Vietnamese student groups), care should be taken because of the fact that students from one group will suspect the native speaker of the other language group.

V. Support/Preventive Suggestions

Staff may want to consider these suggestions for supportive/preventive strategies to minimize Indochinese student problems.

1. Both Indochinese students and parents should be made aware of all school rules, regulations, expectations and their responsibilities through an orientation workshop.

2. A list of daily school behaviors - "to do's/not-to-do's" - should be developed and given to Indochinese students.

3. Special counseling and activities can be conducted with Indochinese students to facilitate their cultural and behavior transition to the American school setting.

4. Teachers and non-Indochinese students should be made aware of Indochinese culture and behavioral style.

5. Activities should be conducted to improve communication between Indochinese students and other students, teachers and parents.

6. Clarify the specific roles of Indochinese instructional aides relative to their work in the classroom, such as supporting the teacher and assisting in the resolution of school problems involving Indochinese students should be clarified to all parties.

VI. For Assistance

Contact either SPI's Office for Equity Education at (206) 753-2560 or SPI's Bilingual Education Office at (206) 753-2573.